

# Wreck Island Natural Area Preserve

## 1380 acres – Northampton County, Virginia

**The Site:** One of Virginia's pristine coastal barrier islands, Wreck Island Natural Area Preserve provides secluded nesting sites for at least a dozen species of birds that rarely nest in the state. The island is also home to one rare plant species and features high-energy beach, coastal dune, maritime scrub, salt flat and salt marsh communities. Wreck Island is part of a 45,000-acre barrier island wilderness designated by the United Nations in 1979 an International Biosphere Reserve, and in 1990 it became part of the Maryland-Virginia Barrier Islands International Shorebird Reserve, part of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Wreck Island was acquired by the state in 1960 and 1961 with assistance from the Philadelphia Conservationists Inc. and the Old Dominion Foundation. It was dedicated a state Natural Area Preserve in 1991.

**Natural History:** Throughout the seasons, Wreck Island Natural Area Preserve is a haven for a vast array of birds. In winter, waterfowl use the island's creeks and saltmarsh for food and shelter. In spring and fall, hordes of migrating sandpipers and plovers comb the beach, loading up on calories for the next night's flight to distant shores. From mid-spring through late summer, many species of birds nest on the island. Shorebirds – terns, gulls and plovers – favor the upper beach and dunes, usually just above the wash of crashing waves. Depending on the species, these nests may be shallow depressions in the sand or shells, or saucers constructed of particles of flotsam. One of Wreck Island's shore-nesters, the Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*), is a federally threatened species. Wading birds, including ibises, herons and egrets, build nests of twigs in shrub thickets on the landward side of the island.

Though Wreck Island is a haven for nesting birds, it is nonetheless fraught with hazards. Storms or unusually high tides can flood ground nests, drowning eggs and chicks. High winds can rip nests and young from rookeries in shrub communities. Avian predators are a constant threat to unguarded eggs and hatchlings, and mammalian predators such as raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and possibly coyotes (*Canis latrans*) may be important nest predators. Human visitation at the wrong time of year also negatively affects bird nesting success. All the island's ground nesters have "cryptic" (naturally camouflaged) eggs, which are easily overlooked and trampled. Also, adult birds guarding nests will take flight when intruders approach, leaving eggs and young unshaded and vulnerable to lethally extreme temperatures as well as to predators.

As with all barrier islands, the shape of Wreck Island and the profile of the beach are constantly changing. At one time there were two islands here: Wreck and Bone. Shifting sands have since filled the channel between the two creating what is now a single island. The island is gradually migrating westward and in recent years has decreased in area.

**Resource Management:** Natural Heritage stewards monitor populations of nesting birds and post signs near bird nesting colonies on Wreck Island. Long-term resource management plans for the preserve are under development.

**Compatible Uses:** Outside of the bird nesting season, the island is suitable for low-impact day-use activities such as environmental education, hiking, bird watching, surf fishing and nature photography. Camping, open fires, unleashed dogs and motorized vehicles are not permitted.

**Public Access:** Far from the mainland, Wreck Island is accessible by boat only. Boaters should have up-to-date navigational charts and/or be highly experienced in navigating the narrow, shallow channels between the mainland and the island. No dock, sanitary facilities or drinking water is available on the island. Because Wreck Island is a sanctuary for nesting shorebirds, **the preserve is closed to the public during the bird nesting period of April 15 through August 31.**

**Location:** Wreck Island is near the southern terminus of the chain of barrier islands along Virginia's Eastern Shore. The nearest public boat ramp is about seven miles to the west in the town of Oyster. To reach Oyster, take U.S. Route 13 to Business Route 13 near Cheriton. From Business 13 take Route 639 east 2.5 miles into Oyster.

### Natural Heritage Resources

**Bird nesting colonies** including the following rare nesters for Virginia

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) G5/S2B  
Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) G3/S2  
Wilson's Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*) G5/S1  
Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) G5/S2  
Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) G5/S2  
Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*) G5/S2  
White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) G5/S1  
Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) G5/S2  
Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) G5/S2  
Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) G4/S2  
Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*) G5/S2

### Plant

sea-beach knotweed (*Polygonum glaucum*) G3/S1S2

### For more information contact:

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation  
Natural Heritage Program

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Department of Conservation & Recreation

CONSERVING VIRGINIA'S NATURAL & RECREATIONAL RESOURCES

*Natural Heritage Program-  
Conserving Virginia's biodiversity through inventory,  
protection, and stewardship*

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